

7 | THE REVOLVING ROOM

I am sitting in the San Francisco Hyatt, high up, surrounded by glass in a revolving restaurant. The Golden Gate Bridge looms a majestic red before me while I tell my colleague Angie about the article in my dad's folder. "No byline," I say, "but as soon as I read that the whole village was saving goose liver to sell in the city, I knew my dad wrote it. Something about the voice brought his voice back."

"What's the name of the village?" Angie asks, stopping my segue into my paper tomorrow for this conference on teaching literature and writing.

"Oh, it's just a tiny place near Stuttgart. No place anyone has heard of."

Certainly not a Texan like Angie Watson. Thick curly blond hair I always wanted, intense blue eyes, and a figure that must have ruled the Gulf Coast surfers in younger days. We'd met on a panel here years ago, found out we used the same reading glasses (I'd forgotten mine and borrowed hers for my talk), and that we both drank only decaf because of scares with breast cancer in the same year. We'd been meeting yearly ever since, drawn by the small surprises within our big difference: I'm Jewish New Jersey; she's a Texan WASP.

"So what's the name?" Angie asks again. "Of the village?"

"Oh, REXINGEN, near a place called Horb," I say impatiently, wanting to get back to my talk on the power of voice. Angie always has good ideas.

“Ah, in the Schwarzwald!” Her enamel hoop earrings bob with delight, as their lemon yellow centers, matched to her suit, catch the light. “I know Rexingen well.”

“My God, how?” I’ve never met anyone not directly or indirectly related to me who ever heard of Rexingen.

“My mother’s family comes from Ilhausen, practically next door. We visited there every summer when I was little and walked all through the hills. I remember a *Gasthaus* where we’d go to eat *Spätzle*, my favorite!”

“Don’t laugh,” I laugh nervously, “but my aunt Hilde’s family owned a *Gasthaus*.”

“No!”

“And she made great *Spätzle*.” She leans forward, and I lean back. “You’re from Germany?” After years of dodging strange relatives who hugged too hard, I pride myself on detecting even a trace of German a mile away. “You have no accent.”

She laughs. “If you arrive in Dallas in 1946, and are in the second grade, you get rid of your accent as fast as possible, believe me.”

I still can’t believe she’s not the all-American girl, the type I remember as being cheerleader and prom queen and getting the all-American varsity boy. On our first panel five years ago, the room was packed with admirers of her wit and charm. Myself included. That’s why when she sent me a postcard before the next conference saying, “How about lunch?” I answered right away. Sure. And it’s been a same-time-next-year lunch date ever since.

If she came in 1946, she must be Jewish, even with that blond hair. *Did she survive a concentration camp? Did her family?* I look for numbers on her arm, but Angie is wearing long sleeves.

“My older sister, Ruth, also came as a child,” I say, and describe how the neighborhood kids used to call her “Kraut” until she brought all her paper dolls onto the front stoop and gave the leader two of them. “That bought her more time to learn English.”

I pause, hoping she’ll start her story, but she smiles like a therapist encouraging me on. I tell her how my family left Germany in 1936, and how they had to wait in Switzerland for months until

they could go to America, and how they sailed on the Dutch ship *Van Dam* and settled in a row house in Queens for three years surrounded by relatives, the women knitting hats and baby booties for money while the men tried starting a business in a strange land.

The Golden Gate Bridge has almost disappeared, and Alcatraz has drifted into view, too slowly to notice. "I am sorry your family had to leave Germany," she says, "but they were the lucky ones, were they not?"

Yes, now I hear something in her voice, maybe a rhythm or word inversion not quite right. I do that, too, if I'm not careful, the echoes of my parents' hard-learned English. I nod. "Yes, they were very lucky."

The waiter asks about coffee and dessert. We say "decaf" at the same time, reject dessert, and gaze out the window for a while. Alcatraz disappears and a giant clock appears, like a stern face. She asks me when I'll be speaking, what sessions I've attended, and where I got my sweater. "I love that blue. It suits you." I tell her my mother knit it, that she's the knitter for the family and my grandmother was the seamstress, so I do neither. I laugh. She does not.

"I wish I had something from my mother . . ." Angie's strong, clipped voice has become a whisper. "I have nothing—no letters, not even a photo of her. The bombs destroyed everything in our house."

"They bombed your house? Where were you?" Now I imagine her hiding in a false closet like my friend's cousin, or escaping across wild mountains to Portugal and then Palestine.

"We were in a small village near Munich, not unlike your father's. My father sent us there to be safe, but the Allies found us. They bombed our house, the only one bombed in the whole village." I hear some anger now. "My brother and I were in school, but my mother was killed." She takes a deep breath. "It was a week before the end of the war."

I mumble I'm sorry, thinking, *My God, she's a real German!* I, who still buy nothing German (except for a Krups coffee maker), am talking about Hitler with someone whose family might be Nazis. . . .

“They bombed us on purpose,” Angie’s voice has sharpened. “They wanted to punish my father.”

“Who did?”

She takes a long sip of coffee. “The Allies. My father was working on the bombs used in the blitzkrieg. The British, especially, wanted him dead.”

Now I see Teutonic lines around a tight mouth and imagine her a child in thick, blond braids, waving Nazi flags and singing Nazi songs in Hitler parades. I remind myself that she lost her mother senselessly while I still have mine knitting sweaters for me. But my empathy feels as false as my next words: “You can’t know for sure they were after your family.” *Her whole story is irrational!* “How could the Allies single you out in a rented house?” I say, trying to soothe.

“I saw the plane. It dropped away from its squadron, swooping down. I was in the schoolyard. The sky was clear blue, only one small cloud . . . I still hear that bomb.” She looks smaller, like that child. “A farmer’s wife took me to her house and told me that my mother had gone to Munich, and I believed her. Why should I not? Three days later she took me to a gravestone and I read my mother’s name, so I knew. We walked back past my house, but there was nothing, only a charred pile by the roadside, and the woman said, ‘Don’t stop. And don’t cry!’”

Angie straightens up, as if she still hears that voice. Behave. Be strong. A good German girl. She shrugs. “But life goes on, does it not?” We look out the window, at the sun that has just come out, making the bay sparkle. An all-glass pyramid shimmers like ice on our right.

The waiter pours more coffee. I sip, but have trouble swallowing. I’m thinking of Helga, whose office is near mine, and how her mother at least hid someone—a Jew or maybe a resister?—and got caught. Helga, the only other German Gentile I had talked to about the Nazis, spent the last year of the war in a Berlin jail with her whole family. Saved from execution by the Russians.

“Did you know any Jews?” I ask Angie, sounding casual, I hope. After all, the past is not her fault. She was only six or seven years old.

“There were no Jews in our village,” she says quickly. “My parents never talked about Jewish issues.” A strange word, “issues.” I worry. Her earrings bob. “I knew nothing until *The Diary of Anne Frank* came out,” she says. “A wonderful book. I remember how shocked I was. You read it, of course?”

I nod, struggling to accept the “wonderful book” and the “I didn’t know” argument. But how could she know? She was my age, and what I knew about the Holocaust came from watching Hollywood movies and reading Anne Frank’s diary when I was twelve. There were no Holocaust museums or movies like *Schindler’s List*. And no one in the early 1950s, Jew or German, talked much about what had happened, especially not to children of parents starting again.

I picture us both in Rexingen, two little schoolgirls, me on the third floor of the school with Moses, Angie on the second floor with Jesus. That’s how my father had described it: Jews had one floor of the *Volksschule*, Christians had the other two, and all shared the dirt playground. I picture us after school, going into the forest together to make doll blankets out of fern leaves and wildflowers, the way Hannah said she used to do.

But then what? What happens after her father begins making bombs for Hitler and my father begins taping his money to toilets of trains heading to Switzerland? And what if I have to wear a yellow armband with a star and she is a poster child for “good Aryan blood”? Would she throw sticks at me? Or watch her friends pull my hair, or sing the popular Horst Wessel song:

When Jewish blood drips from our knives
It solves the problems of our lives. . . .

Or would she just pretend I am no longer there?

The sun keeps ducking behind clouds, its light bouncing off buildings and then going dull. Maybe her father was not really for Hitler, but just someone not wanting to make waves. Maybe

as a scientist, Angie's father had no choice: work for the Führer or be shot. If he had been a Nazi, he'd have been tried as a war criminal. I had seen *Judgment at Nuremberg* with Spencer Tracy dispensing justice enough times to believe that. Unless her father was brilliant, another Wernher von Braun, he wouldn't have been allowed into America.

"It must have been hard getting into America," I say, feeling like Columbo minus the trench coat. "Did you have family here?"

"No, no one." She looks straight at me, and we both know what is unsaid: that the Americans *did* need her father's brain power in case the Cold War with Russia became hot.

I tell myself it was long ago, and her father could have been a good man in terrible times. And besides, even if he was a big Nazi and hated Jews, Angie is not like that. Doesn't she ask me to meet for lunch every year?

So what am I to do? Bury the past? Pretend it never happened? Storm out? For the first time in my American life I feel the weight of those verbs—pretend, bury, storm out—and what they meant during Nazi times when it was so easy for Germans to say to Jews, "So what if your mother dies!" I can't imagine Angie like that, but Nazi groupthink changed so many, so fast. Maybe she would have said it! And what would I have said if *I* were the "Aryan" and she the Jew?

I think again of stories like the one about the Torah being saved. And Christian carpenters fixing the Jewish windows after Kristallnacht. And the story of my father's business friend in Frankfurt who would turn the picture of Hitler to the wall whenever my father visited and say with great joy: "Für meinen guten jüdischer Freund, Artur" (For my good Jewish friend, Arthur). And how the head of the Stuttgart Gestapo saved my uncle Fritz. They played cards together for twenty years, so when Jewish passports were taken away he told my uncle, "Tell me when you want to leave and I will give them back for that day." And he did, justifying himself by saying: "You are not *typische Juden* [typical Jews]." Then he rounded up thousands of Jews he didn't know personally for deportation.

“Did *your* father ever talk about Germany?” Angie asks softly, surprising me.

“About growing up in Rexingen, all the time,” I say, hating my cheerfulness, as if Hitler had never happened. “And about his escaping the Nazis. Those stories I loved because my dad was the hero, leading our family out of danger, like Moses.” I smile. She smiles.

“What about *your* father?” I ask, as the Oakland Bay Bridge comes into view, reaching over the whitecaps in the bay to touch the tiny houses, like dots, in the Berkeley hills. It all moves so slowly, like a still life trapped by time, as we are.

“Oh, he’d talk about how wonderful and beautiful my mother was, and how I looked just like her!” Angie tosses her hair behind her ear and says solemnly, “He loved her very much, you know.”

“And nothing else?” She shakes her head. “And you didn’t ask?” Suddenly I hate the bobbing earrings. *Stop them, for God’s sake!* “Nothing else?” I ask again. *She lost her mother, remember. Love is love.*

She shakes her head. “All he’d say was, ‘*Ach, Schatzie*’—that was what he called me—‘you can’t know what life was like then. Difficult times, difficult times.’” She sits up straighter. “He was too sad for me to ask more—and then, too soon, he died. It was my first husband, you know, who put me through college.” She takes my hands in hers. Soft palms, long pink nails. “But I am glad that we are good friends, Mimi.” I’m waiting for “*Liebe Mimile*,” what my relatives used to say. “And who knows . . . ?” she says with the smile I’ve seen light up a crowded room. “Without Hitler, we might have met and eaten *Spätzle* together in that *Gasthaus!* I would have liked that, wouldn’t you?”

I would, I would not, I would, would not. The voices in me collide, as I reach, with both my hands, for my coffee cup. For Hitler is always there, the gas chambers are always there, no matter how much I want us just to be two affable Americans having lunch. Beneath our good intentions, unsaid words linger. *It’s not my fault. . . . I know, but . . . I wasn’t there. . . . I know, but. . . . Sorry. . . .* Words of anger, loss, and guilt that change nothing in the past,

resolve nothing now—except the possibility of friendship that needs more open talk than we risk in this revolving room.

In the next few years, I will have such talks, but I don't know that yet. I will go to Rexingen many times and will meet my father's former neighbors and other Germans willing to tackle the stories and silences of who we are. I will be armed with a yellow pad of questions, no surprise encounters like today. And after a while I will tell them about Angie and admit that I feel vulnerable in their country until someone *proves* to be nice. And Germans who are nice will tell me about a grandfather who is still a Nazi, and a father who was a train engineer near Auschwitz, and a grandmother who received *Mein Kampf* as a wedding present. And in between we will exchange our mothers' cucumber salad recipes and hike through the woods and talk about jobs and children as we step in and out of dark rooms of legacy with the hope of moving on.

But none of that seems possible in San Francisco, where history has caught us off guard. I am not ready for Angie, the child of possible Nazis—and whatever is behind our smiles. She invites me to the annual conference Talent Night: "Come! I'll be in it. It should be great fun!" and I nod, thinking I'd rather go to Fisherman's Wharf for crabs, if the weather holds. We stand up to hug goodbye as the Golden Gate reappears, now gray against a gray-ing sky. She mentions next year in San Antonio and I mean to keep in touch, I really do. But so far we keep missing each other.